DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 270 FL 027 283

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TITLE Finding Clues, Not Detecting Errors--A Different Approach to EFL Composition.
PUB DATE 2000-05-00
NOTE 23p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); Error Correction; Feedback; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Language Proficiency; Second Language Instruction; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Processes; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Taiwan

ABSTRACT

The process oriented approach to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction has spurred such new ideas as student instruction and the whole language approach. New thinking justifies the validity of qualitative research, which lets researchers view subjects' learning processes from previously impossible angles. This paper examines ESL writing expertise and English language proficiency. It explains that how students plan, organize, revise, and edit their writing is as important as their English language proficiency. Conventional methods of grading and correcting students' compositions are inadequate, because they rely too heavily on language proficiency. When writing, language interacts with writing expertise. Correcting grammatical and word errors seem to be a constant focus for Taiwanese ESL students and teachers, though many instructors try to teach how to organize ideas or write a topic sentence. What students put down on paper is a combination of both writing expertise and English proficiency. ESL writing teachers must find clues that indicate, in terms of writing expertise and English proficiency, what kinds of strengths and weaknesses each student has. ESL writing instruction is most effective when teachers see through flawed language and understand what kind of help each student requires. (Contains 40 references.) (SM)

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Finding Clues, not Detecting Errors—a different approach to EFL composition

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ABSTRACT

The Process-oriented approach, introduced to the field of ESL/EFL in late 1970's, has spurred new ideas like the student-centered instruction as well as the whole language or integrated language approach. Furthermore, the new thinking also justifies the validity of qualitative research methodology, which has enabled researchers and educators to view subjects' learning process from angles that were impossible before.

Hence, our view about ESL/EFL writing performance has been redefined to that of composing two components: writing expertise and English language proficiency (Chen, 1992, 1996; Cumming, 1989; Krashen, 1984). The most important implication is that how students plan, organize, revise, and edit their composition is as important as their English language proficiency. Consequently, conventional methods of grading and correcting students' compositions have proved to be inadequate, because they rely too heavily on the language factor alone. When writing, language factor interacts with writing expertise.

Teaching EFL composition, here in Taiwan, used to be viewed as mostly the daunting task of teaching and correcting grammar. Of course, many instructors do try to teach how to organize ideas or write a topic sentence. But, correcting grammar and word errors just seem to be a never-ending obsession for students as well as teachers.

What students manage to put down on a paper is a combination of both writing expertise and English proficiency. As an EFL composition teacher, we can not simply focus on the language presented before our eyes. We need to find clues, behind the flawed language and impeded thoughts, which may indicate, in terms of the writing expertise and English proficiency, what kind of capabilities and weakness each student has. In essence, EFL composition instruction can be effective only when we teachers can see through flawed language and understand exactly how each student needs help on each count.

Introduction

Teacher's feedback to student's composition is an integral part of teaching writing. It is thought to be useful. But how useful, and how can it be useful? Until recently, these issues have never been carefully examined.

This time-honored tradition of giving feedback has been practiced for centuries in Chinese, mostly as a direct comment as well as a judgement on a piece of writing. Of course, in Chinese we don't call this act "feedback," instead we call it "commenting" and "correcting" (批改).

In the field of teaching English composition here in Taiwan, the same tradition goes on.

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In a study of 58 college-level English composition instructors' views and methods of teaching English composition in Taiwan, 75.9% of the respondents believed that correcting grammar and words can help students write better (Chen, 1997). In the same survey, 53.5 % of the respondents considered correct use of grammar and words an important factor for student's composition to be "Acceptable." But, in the end, 89.7% of the respondents (52 out of 58) wished to teach English courses other than EFL composition.

Cumming (1992) did a case study on three experienced ESL teachers and found them focusing mainly on student task performance rather than on the presentation of content. Sweedler (1993) did a similar study and found writing instructors tend to give scores more on the basis of sentence-level errors than on rhetorical features.

Here is a typical model of the product-oriented approach at work. Instructors invest a lot of effort on commenting and correcting students' compositions. Such an effort closely resembles "Summative evaluation" and hardly qualifies as "feedback," in the sense of instigating interaction between the instructor and students.

From the view of the process-oriented approach, students improve by constantly revising their compositions. Studies have confirmed that good writers revised more than poor writers did (Stallard, 1974) and that good writers focused their revision more on content than on form (Faigley and Witte, 1981). Therefore, a process-oriented composition instructor should provide feedback that would stimulate students to revise further. The primary role of an instructor is that of a coach, not a judge (Holaday, 1997). The instructor should encourage, guide, and direct, not just hand out sentences.

These conflicting views underlie the philosophical difference between the product-oriented approach and the process-oriented approach. On the subject of dealing with EFL composition errors, this paper calls the first approach: "focus on form" whereas the second approach: "focus on content."

Thus, this paper intends to answer the following question: Which types of feedback—focus on form or focus on content—is more beneficial to EFL student writers? Specifically, when reading students' compositions, what kind of clues should an instructor pay attention to? The ultimate question is: Which approach truly fits the needs of English teaching community in Taiwan?

This paper is a synthesis of my researches on EFL composition for the past eight years. Starting from the separation of writing expertise and language proficiency, an issue becomes more evident: since each student's writing performance is the result of an interaction between his/her writing expertise and English proficiency, can error correction really help alleviate EFL students' shortcomings? Or a deep-level problem can be solved only through a fundamentally different approach?

Because of restraints of resources as well as practicality, a researcher in this field usually does not have the luxury of simply diving into an experimental study for every question raised. Why feel frustrated? Persistent, basic studies can lay the ground for a sound rationale, because they help clarify misunderstandings and misconceptions as well. Therefore, this paper, in another sense, points to a new direction. It serves as the keystone for future experimental studies, should resources can be attained.

This paper will start with a discussion of the fundamental philosophy of the two approaches. This discussion will enable us to understand how each approach defines "learning" or "improvement." Then, we can safely deliberate on what type of feedback is more beneficial and how could we do about it.

Sources of Different Performances

In order to understand which type of feedback will benefit students the most, we have to first understand what constitute EFL composition performance. If we can not understand

what variables contribute to EFL composition, how can we determine what kind of help our EFL students need? With a clear understanding of the rationale, we then will be able to agree upon the definition of improvement or learning, with which we will use to judge against the two types of feedback. For this matter, we need to take a brief look at the two conflicting approaches.

Traditional Definition of Performance

In Chen's survey of college English composition instructors' views and methods (Chen, 1997), we can detect a clear trend: When asked about the criteria or activities that are essential for teaching English composition, correct use of grammar and words still dominate much of these instructors' minds. They invest time in grammar exercises, in correcting errors, in giving grades based on, at least partially, correct use of grammar and words. On surface, these teachers pretty much know what they were doing:

1. 77.6 % of the respondents claimed that teaching English composition to be interesting;
2. 63.8 % of them claimed to enjoy reading students' papers;
3. 91.4 % of them felt confident about their teaching.

However, surprisingly, 89.7 % of them (52 out of 58 respondents) did not want to teach English composition (Chen, 1997, p. 359). 75.9% of them (44 respondents) said that they "definitely" wanted to teach English courses other than EFL composition. This last figure is hardly a vote of confidence on the way English composition was taught by the respondents themselves.

The source to these conflicting feelings lies in the way writing performance has been defined by the product-oriented approach. In a word, this approach assesses each student's performance and instructional needs solely on the basis of the text presented before our eyes.

Naturally, the correctness of the surface features attracts instructors' attention (Chen, 1998). In the end, this approach is assessing mostly the language features only (Chen, 1996; 1998).

The audiolingual method has ruled the EFL community for a long, long time. This method sees teaching English as a process of habit-forming, through which models of correct use are taught and practiced in a well-planned curriculum. Such a curriculum is rooted in imitation and repetition, but when facing the task of teaching composition, a very personal and creative act, the audiolingual method shows its weakness. Susser (1994) describes this method this way:

> Writing was seen as grammar instruction, with the emphasis on controlled composition, correction of the product, and correct form over expression of ideas (p. 36).

When a teaching method puts so much emphasis on the surface features of an end product, it inevitably treats each composition as an isolated representative of a particular student's competence of writing. Consequently, composition instructors tend to treat the text with a judgmental view. Specifically, the act of detecting and correcting errors is counted on as a vital part of teaching and learning.

In short, the product-oriented approach tends to evaluate a student's work against external, objective criteria. Each student's performance is evaluated against a correct form. Be it the convention of writing or the correctness of linguistic features, this approach defines performance, with a heavy heart, by an idealized order. In this sense, the reduction of errors is surely a sign of improvement.

Hairston (1982) gave an animated description of the product-oriented approach:

> First, its adherents believe that competent writers know what they are going to say before they begin to write; thus their most important task when they are preparing to write is finding a form into which to organize their content. They also believe… that teaching editing is teaching writing…. It derives partly from the classical rhetorical model that organizes the production of discourse into invention, arrangement, and style, but mostly it seems to be based on some idealized and orderly vision of what literature scholars, whose professional focus is on the written product, seem to imagine is an efficient method of writing. It is

a prescriptive and orderly view of the creative act...(p. 78).

The most visible example of the product-oriented approach's inclining toward surface features is its reliance on scores. A score, be it a standardized test score or just a score on a composition, indicates a student's performance. In the view of the approach, English proficiency test can very well be a good indicator to ESL/EFL students' performance in writing. TOEFL used to be the pacesetter in this field.

TOEFL—A Difficult Transition

For almost half a century, TOEFL is the giant in the EFL/ESL community. Its score used to be a powerful verdict on an EFL student's proficiency in all four areas of English. Backed by quantitative measures of reliability and validity, various English proficiency tests swept through EFL/ESL communities around the world.

Throughout the 1970s', skepticism started emerging. EFL/ESL students with acceptable TOEFL scores showed serious flaws in their ability to put English in functional uses. The Council of Graduate Schools in the U.S. (1980), worrying about the unspecified use of TOEFL scores, pointed out:

> While [TOEFL] scores from the low to the middle or high 500s are the most widely used for admission purposes they are probably the most difficult to interpret in terms of the candidate's ability to speak and write in English (p. 18).

As the skepticism and resistance mounted, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) first adopted an alternative version of the English Composition Test (ECT) in 1977—one of the multiple-choice sections being replaced by a twenty-minute essay. In 1986 the TOEFL test included a Test of Written English (TWE).

Yet, criticisms persist. Most of the criticisms center around two issues: types of writing being sampled (Greenberg, 1986; Raimes, 1990) and the rating method and the interpretation of the scores (Owen, 1985; Raimes, 1990). ETS, caught between the demands

for efficient testing and the pressure for more realistic measurements, has tried to strike a difficult balance. But the nature of the task makes the sought-after balance all the more difficult.

When it comes to writing, many variables come into play. This is how TOEFL (even with the TWE) exposes its serious flaw. This is also why the product-oriented fails us, despite the EFL community's insistence on this tradition for several decades. As Chen (1996) concluded:

> One possible reason for our lack of understanding... is that complex variables are involved, like writing expertise, English proficiency, literacy experience, topic type... et al. (p. 22.20).

A Definition Centered around Students

Writing is a very personal and creative act. A different approach to assessing students' writing performance as well as their instructional needs is first to acknowledge that there are many variables involved in writing performance, let alone EFL composition (Chen, 1992, 1996, 1998; Raimes, 1985, 1987). Consequently, relying on one score to reveal information about several variables becomes out of touch with the reality.

Then, what constitutes writing performance? Let's first start with the fundamental philosophy of the process-oriented approach.

Vygotsky (1962) asserts that thought co-exists interdependently with language. Together, they help mold each other into being. Through interaction, language grows with thought. Writing, according to Vygotsky, imposes such a difficult challenge that it tests a person's ability to generate ideas as well as to shape those ideas into words. Only through words can the ideas be coded and decoded. In words a reader sees only ideas. But for the writer, those words are the fruits of an interaction between language and thinking. Vygotsky asserts that this interaction is a never-ending process (1962):

> The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual

> movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. In that process the relation of thought to word undergoes changes which themselves may be regarded as development in the functional sense. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them (p. 125).

Hence the term: "Process-Oriented Approach." Piaget (1969) voiced a similar opinion:

> ...there is a surprising degree of correlation between the language employed and the mode of reasoning... indicate that language does not constitute the source of logic but is, on the contrary, structured by it (p. 90).

During this process, a student first learns new language through "socialization" (Vygotsky, 1962). Through intensive and extensive contact with language, a student acquires the language code (Chen, 1992; Krashen, 1984). However, simply acquiring language code is not enough. Students gained a mastery of the language by "interaction" (Vygotsky, 1962). They create meaning to interact with the surrounding environments. Following this line of thinking, Odell (1981) defined writing competence of native speakers as:

> ... the ability to discover what one wishes to say and to convey one's message through language, syntax, and content that are appropriate for one's audience and purpose (p. 103).

Upon close examination, Odell's definition contains two parts:

1. "the ability to discover what one wishes to say": This refers to methods a writer employs during the process of writing to discover, organize, and edit whatever he/she wants to say. Some calls it writing expertise (Chen, 1992, 1996; Cumming, 1989), writing skills (Raimes, 1985, 1987), or writing strategies (Jones, 1983).
2. "to convey one's message through language, syntax and content that are appropriate for one's audience and purpose": This is where one's language competence matters.

Krashen (1984), applying this line of thinking, went on to suggest two causes for the deficiency of some ESL/EFL writers:

1. Lack of acquisition of the code (written English).

2. A poor or inefficient composing process (p. 29).

Research Findings

The process-oriented approach points out the need for a different kind of research—namely, researches directed at the process of learning. Researchers like Zamel set out to understand if ESL writers are engaged in a process of discovering meaning or they are attending primarily to language. The findings all clearly showed that ESL writers are striving to generate ideas and create meaning, as any native speaker would do (Raimes, 1985, 1987; Zamel, 1982).

Then, some researchers turned their attention to the components of ESL/EFL writing performance. Cumming (1989) formally proposed the separation of language proficiency and writing expertise: subjects with better native language writing expertise demonstrated more skilled process of writing in English. Subjects' second-language proficiency is only "an additive factor, enhancing the overall quality of writing produced, and interacting with the attention that participants devoted to aspects of their writing. But second-language proficiency did not visibly affect the processes of composing" (p. 81).

Chen (1992, 1996) compared EFL students' compositions in both L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) and found that "both language proficiency and writing expertise were involved and interacting" (Chen, 1992, p. 137). Instead of being "an additive factor," English is an "extra burden" (Chen, 1992, p. 131) for EFL writers.

On the one hand, this language burden affects the process of generating the content: "...when writing in English the primary challenge EFL writers face is not language problems but how to use the language to create meaning" (p. 131). But on the other hand, subjects were concentrating on creating meaning, true to Raimes' (1985) finding. Consequently, Chen (1996) concludes:

> The logical explanation, both by theories or by the analysis of this study, is that students' writing expertise-- methods, skills, experiences... et al-- underlies their writing capability. Their language proficiency—English in this case—facilitates or impedes the application of their writing expertise (p. 22.19).

Crerand (1993), in a study aimed to explore the role between first and second language literacy, concurs that L2 learners do rely on L1 literary skills for L2 writing, and that L2 language proficiency, including oral skills, appears to affect L2 writing skills.

Vignola (1995), in a more detailed report, made two more findings: (a) advanced L1 writing skills combined with advanced L2 global competence seemed necessary for the production of superior quality L2 writing; (b) decision-making during the writing process varied more as a function of their L1 writing skills than as a function of L2 global competence.

In 1999, Chen did a statistical analysis of 11 Chinese graduate students' writings in both Chinese and English, by employing a separate-skills grading scheme. The results clearly showed that subjects' native language writing expertise had a clear impact on their English writing performance. English language proficiency is an "important and consistent factor" (Chen, 1999, p. 287). It poses difficulty to subjects, but "at the same time, subjects were not troubled by it." (p. 287).

What are the implications of this line of research findings?

New Definition of Improvement

Clearly there are two primary variables contributing to the performance of EFL compositions: language proficiency and writing expertise. In theory, there could be four types of EFL composition students:

1. Good English proficiency and good writing expertise.
2. Poor English proficiency and good writing expertise.
3. Good English proficiency and poor writing expertise.
4. Poor English proficiency and poor writing expertise (Chen, 1998, p. 205).

For each type of student, the need for improvement comes from different sources. Some need more help on the language; some need more help on the writing skills; some need both; some just need more encouragement.

The underlying principle to help students improve, though, remains the same: sustained, self-motivated readings and actual writing practices (Krashen, 1984). Through "large amounts of self-motivated reading for interest and/or pleasure," students will acquire "the language code"(p. 20). The actual writing practices enable students to learn the appropriate "procedures that will facilitate the discovery of meaning and an efficient writing process" (p. 36).

Hall and Birkerts (1994) advocates that:

> There is no writing well without reading well. The two activities are intimately connected.... For both take place in and through language.... Reading is the process of writing in reverse, and writing is the mirror image of reading. The mirror...is language itself (p. 26).

This may sound too general, yet the secret lies not in magical methods or strategies, but in the sustained effort. All those help on language (via reading) and writing skills (via actual writing practices) are designed just to get students involved in yet more reading and writing. Thus, improvement comes as the result of recurring, sustained activities of reading and writing (Chen 1996, 1997, 1999).

The Debate on Teacher Feedback—Content vs. Form

At the beginning of this debate, a fundamental question must be brought up: What is the purpose of giving feedback—any type of it? Put it another way: What is the function of the feedback we, as instructors, give to students? What is our goal of doing this?

The school advocating the focus on form would argue that teacher feedback helps students realize that they made mistakes. The implication is that students might learn from

this experience and be able to avoid the same mistake next time. This explains why so many teachers invest so much effort on correcting errors. Reid (1993) explained the underlying assumption of this school: "...errors had to be prevented and eliminated. Students were taught correct language usage, and mistakes were viewed as deviant" (p. 22).

True to its philosophy, this approach focuses on the surface features of the text presented by students and sees error reduction as an important task on the instructors and a great milestone of improvement on the students. But all that correcting errors eventually frustrates EFL writing instructors, as Chen's 1997 survey of EFL composition instructors clearly showed. Not surprisingly, most studies on correcting errors do not shed a favorable light on the subject.

Kasper (1995) found that a nonjudgmental, expression-oriented approach to ESL writing results in higher student pass rates than does a judgmental, error-oriented approach.

Kepner (1991) compared ESL instructors' written messages on students' composition. Kepner divided the messages into two groups: error- vs. message-oriented. The study found that error corrections and rule reminders did not significantly improve students' written accuracy or enhance the content quality of their writing. On the other hand, message-related comments promoted writing proficiency.

Truscott (1996) argues that ESL writing classes should do away with grammar correction, because it is ineffective, harmful, and unhelpful to learning.

Fathman & Whalley (1990) did a study to test 4 types of feedback: no feedback at all, feedback on grammar only, feedback on content only, and feedback on both grammar and content. Their study found that all four groups made significant improvement on second draft. But they concluded:

> Students significantly improved the content and wrote longer compositions when they did revisions without any feedback, which suggests that rewriting is worthwhile and teacher intervention is not always necessary (p. 186).

The feedback focused on content aims not to reduce errors directly but to stimulate more revision. This approach turns its attention primarily on how to instigate more rethinking about the text. It sets out to ignite more ideas, different approaches, or refined expressions. This approach believes that improvement follows a sustained process of writing and rewriting and that as students write more, they improve not only in content but also in language.

This paper has used the words: "stimulate," "instigate," or "ignite" to denote the idea of composition instructors acting "as a coach, not as a judge." Some other researchers call it: "Reformulation" (Cowie, 1995; Swenson, 1997).

By "Reformulation," a composition instructor looks at places where the content or the expression can be used as a starting point for more communication. The instructor then asks the student to rework on them. Specifically, the instructor would encourage the student to try alternatives that may contribute to a stronger presentation. Maybe a different idea, a different organization, or a different wording could make a better presentation.

In other words, this type of feedback intends to start a communication between the instructor and the student. In addition, the focus of this communication centers around the content, the meaning of the text. Johnson (1988) argued: "learners need to see for themselves what has gone wrong, in the operating conditions in which they went wrong" (p. 93). Ellis (1998) asserts: "it may prove more effective if it (negative feedback) takes place in the context of activities in which the primary focus is on meaning rather on form" (p. 52).

In a word, the difference between the focus on form vs. the focus on content is that the former aims to "repair the damage" (Flower and Hayes, 1981, p. 55) whereas the latter intends to "intervene" (Emig, 1967, p.128). Zamel (1983) did a great job on summing up the two approaches:

> Intervening throughout the process sets up a dynamic relationship which gives writers the opportunity to tell their readers what they mean to say before these

writers are told what they ought to have done (p. 182).

Reformulation—How Do We Do about It?

Ellis (1998) provided an example for reformulation in the context of a conversation:

A: I born on 1944.
B: Oh, you were born in 1944.
A: Yeah, in 1944 (p. 52).

How should we apply the same idea to an EFL composition, then?

There are three considerations we need to take into account:

1. In composition, the interaction between an instructor and the students is not instant, nor is it automatic. Therefore, the instructor needs to work hard to foster and sustain a communication between each individual student and him/herself. This calls for an intensive intervention before and during the writing process.
2. Faced with various types of errors or flaws of an EFL composition, a composition instructor must make choices. He/she must determine what is important and urgent and what can wait, based on his/her own sense of priority. Clearly, this sense of priority should be content-oriented.
3. The expected interaction won't take place, if the instructor does not follow up on the point he/she has raised with a particular student. In other words, multiple drafts are the only means to sustain this interaction.

The instructor intervenes to help students reformulate the ideas or the language. This intervention starts early in almost every stage of the composing process. Applebee (1986) advocates that all the activities are "designed to help students think through and organize their ideas before writing and to rethink and revise their initial drafts" (p. 95). Reformulation is a never-ending process through which students are urged to rethink through what they intend to convey.

Ziv (1984) did a case study on four college freshmen students' writings. She gave written feedback to them based on the categories she had devised. These categories allowed her to focus her attention on areas that each student needs help. As students responded to her feedback, she was directing them to a sustained dialogue through which each student produced multiple drafts. Ziv's research shows that when the teacher intervenes, as the student is writing and revising, the final product shows improvement over the intermediate drafts.

Ziv's study has all the ingredients of the considerations mentioned above. Aren't those categories functioned as clues that guided her attention? Her responses to each student's text falling to any one of those categories serve to stimulate more response from each student.

The instructor picked his/her target carefully so that the student won't be overwhelmed by either seemingly endless and incoherent demands or by vague comments that are hard to follow. For example: comments like: "not clear" or "be specific" need more clarification. On the other hand, "Do you mean to say that...?" or "Could you please give a few specific examples?" gives clearer direction and has a much better chance of inviting a student response.

Similarly, when faced with a very long, but jumbled sentence, which type of response might be more effective?

1. "Please rewrite this into two or more sentences."
2. The instructor rewrites the whole sentence for the student.
3. "too long and not clear" or "What are you trying to say?"

On a particular grammar or word error, students can be better served if the instructor asks: "Are you sure about how to use a Gerund? If not, can you try a different expression?" Or "How do you differentiate 'take,' 'carry,' and 'bring'?" Instead of pointing out and

correcting errors directly, a carefully chosen feedback could stir up a lot more learning.

In other words, the instructor must distinguish feedback that merely asks students to "repair the damage" from feedback that guides students to reformulate.

Conclusion

First, let's look at the following two simple examples:

"I born in 1944."

"I in 1944 was born."

Are they just two simple cases of grammatical errors of different sorts? Or is each example demonstrating a different level of flaw, one is of a seemingly surface level whereas the other a deeper one?

The easiest task would have been to simply correct it: "I was born in 1944." But an instructor intends to intervene would do it differently: "So, you were born in 1944. Could you please tell me more about how you were born in 1944? 1944 was a very difficult time. You were born in a difficult situation in 1944."

The greatest danger for us EFL composition instructors is to succumb ourselves to the status of "composition slaves" (Hairston, 1986, p. 117). The traditional pedagogy demands that instructors make meticulous and copious comments on student papers and hold conferences. They look hard at each student's writing and strive to improve it directly. The conventional wisdom believes that student writing improves "in direct proportion to the amount of time teachers spend on their papers" (p. 117). But, in the end, most of them are very unhappy about it (Chen, 1997).

For an untrained eye, all those obvious surface errors easily attract his/her attention. But, an instructor with a curious mind should first ask: Are those errors the only problem this particular student has or are they the symptoms of a deeper problem?

EFL composition performance is the result of an interaction between a student's English proficiency and his/her writing expertise. Consequently, when we read a student's composition, we should strive to establish a profile of this particular student's strength and weakness in language and writing expertise. Specifically, we need to ascertain if a perceived flaw in content is the result of poor language, poor writing expertise, or both?

Looking back at the two examples, the first one seems to be a simple grammatical error. The word "seems" is used because there can be two ways to explain this simple error:

1. The student simply failed to notice that he/she needs a "Be verb" in a passive tone.
2. The student does not know in this circumstance, a passive tone is needed. In Chinese, the passive tone is not always so clearly marked.

But the second example shows that this student is very likely organizing his/her idea in Chinese. This is definitely not just a simple case of an incorrect positioning of a prepositional phrase. This particular student needs more than error correction.

Therefore, before we make any comment or correction, we need to first find clues that will reveal the true causes of a particular student's deficiencies. These clues then help us shape our strategy on how to help. Should we first start with an intensive reading and some light writing? Should we focus on the text and try to expand and refine it? Should we remind this particular student to be careful on editing? Or just constant positive encouragement is good enough?

A different strategy dictates a different mode of feedback. Nevertheless, every written feedback is designed to stimulate a communication between the instructor and the student. Through this sustained communication, the student is enticed or pushed to reformulate his/her ideas or wordings.

Therefore, instead of attacking errors directly, the approach that urges and guides to reformulate the text is more beneficial to EFL students. In the field of EFL composition,

direct instruction or direction error correction more often than not frustrates us. The process-oriented approach enables EFL composition teachers to have a clearer understanding of learning and, thus, to set a more realistic goal of teaching. When we know what constitute EFL composition performance, we know how to find clues. When we know how and where to find clues, we will have a much better chance of success.

Implications

The slogan "Student-Centered" does not come out of a vacuum. The fundamental value of this slogan derives from the belief that each student brings with him/herself a unique background. So, teachers need to understand what kind of students they are teaching. A teacher needs to understand the strength and weakness of each student before he/she can determine what he/she is going to teach. This slogan is a rebellion against the days when teachers formulate the curriculum of a course in his/her study before he/she meets the students. A truly student-centered EFL composition course should not judge each composition simply by a criterion of right-or-wrong.

The process-oriented approach gives teachers and researchers a different angle to look at students. Our understanding of what is going on during the process of learning will empower us to have a clear definition of "learning." Then, we can realize that intervention during the process of learning helps students rethink and reformulate.

The tradition of commenting and correcting forms has been sustained under an assumption: If we keep doing this, students will eventually improve. But repairing the damage in itself alone can not be equated with acquiring fluency and accuracy. The goal of an error-free composition seems so frustratingly elusive. After all those practices, drills, error-corrections, and direct instruction have failed, why can't we stop and ask ourselves: How do students really learn? What works better to keep the learning process going? Are

we setting up a goal too high and employing an approach too ineffective?

A die-hard traditionalist focuses on errors that need to be eradicated. In the eyes of a process-oriented instructor, he/she looks for clues early on that cry for help. He/she then urges and guides the student to rethink and reformulate again and again. What kind of an EFL composition instructor would fit in a student-centered classroom: a judge? Or a coach?

This paper has built a sound argument for a different approach to help students improve their English composition. Still, we need to test and verify it in an experimental study. Should the resources become available, this researcher will surely take on this challenge.

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